October 2, 2014

Shazia Yousuf: The Hidden Damage

In the 1990s, as Kashmiri men fighting Indian occupation were tortured and killed, Kashmiri women silently suffered through a different kind of war.

Image from Kashmir Global via Flickr

By **Shazia Yousuf**

The soldiers had just left and my grandmother's house looked battered and bruised. Cupboards and chests lay open like fresh wounds, bleeding secrets of the family that were neatly kept between books and folded clothes.

It was a crackdown, a routine search operation that Indian soldiers carried out to catch Kashmiri men who had taken up arms to fight the Indian occupation in 1989. Soldiers would pick a random location on a random day and ask men to assemble in front of a group of masked informers. Whenever an informer pointed his finger at someone, the person was bundled into a military vehicle and taken to an unknown location for torture or death.

Men detested crackdowns. They hated being at the mercy of an unknown masked man. Women hated them too. Not because they had to face soldiers all alone during the house to house searches for militants and arms. Not because the soldiers turned things upside down and left the houses in disorder and chaos. There was a different reason.

When the crackdown was just over at my grandmother's house and soldiers were leaving the neighborhood with the identified men, my young aunt rushed upstairs with her friend. I was a little girl, around seven and it was the first crackdown I was witnessing at my maternal home. I curiously followed my aunt and her friend as they climbed the narrow staircase.

Around a dozen sanitary pads lay scattered in my aunt's room. Her cupboard drawers lay emptied on her bed, revealing everything that was in them: her fancy lingerie, scissors,

tweezers, and beauty creams. My aunt looked miserable, as if she had lost a battle. A whole bunch of unknown men had just left her house, gossiping and giggling about the secrets she so wanted to hide.

“Looks like the bastards had a great time,” my aunt said to her friend, her eyes frozen at something unknown. “Their faces said it all.”

I had almost forgotten about this incident until recently when I went to see my aunt and her newly adopted baby girl. I wanted to see what my forty-something aunt was doing with all the happiness that the child brought to her home. Childlessness had made her quiet and sad and she looked much older than her age. When I saw her from distance, she was talking to this five-days-old child and laughing at the blank stares she received in response. She looked frail but energetic. There was something unusual about her dark circled eyes. They were twinkling with joy.

“I was telling her to be brave and bold and not weak or shy like me,” my aunt said when I reached near and asked what the conversation was about.

Her mention of shyness took me back to her room, where she sat blushing amid sanitary pads and lingerie. I could clearly see my aunt tired of losing yet another battle. Curious, I wanted to know more about how young women felt in those war times and what war meant to them. I began interviewing my aunt.

“They played a different kind of war with us. Only they knew where they pinched; only we knew how it felt. There was no name for it, like for rape or murder,” she said.

Kashmir is a conservative and patriarchal society. Men go out to earn; women stay indoors to take care of the house and children. The mingling of young boys and girls is considered immoral and is highly discouraged. Girls who remain invisible and avoid men’s gazes are believed to be pure and chaste. The honor of a family is thought to be in the hands of its daughters.

Kashmiri girls are expected to live in mystery. No male member of her family should ever see her intimate clothes. They should not be able to guess the timing of her periods. Although Islam exempts Muslim women from fasting and praying during their monthly cycles, almost every Kashmiri woman fakes these obligations in front of men. From eating the predawn meal to breaking fast, from doing ablutions to offering prayers, women simulate every act to leave men clueless. They fake smiles even when writhing in menstrual pain.

So what happened when the same women saw Indian soldiers playing with their intimate things and taking sexual pleasure under the guise of search operations? Did these women talk about this misuse of power? Did they tell their own men what they were going through? Were they ashamed? Angry?

“There was no culture of discussing these issues with our men. That made things worse because soldiers took advantage of it,” recalls my aunt.

My journalist friend once wrote a piece on the humiliation that the crackdowns brought to Kashmiri women. He described how a young girl from his village was forced to unlock a small box that soldiers found in her cupboard. There was no chance of weapons being hidden in it. But seeing the young girl blush, the soldiers became curious to know what it contained.

A number of love letters written in Urdu were taken from the box. The village leader, who was accompanying the soldiers, was made to read them aloud in front of all, including the girl.

“She was embarrassed in front of the old man who now knew about her affair and the boy she was dating,” my friend said. “She never showed him her face again.”

That kind of humiliation was routine for Kashmiri women, who therefore made great efforts to avoid it. I was born three years before the armed war started in Kashmir, but at the time of my birth a fight between two political parties had resulted in the imposition of a curfew in Srinagar, my birthplace and the capital of Kashmir. The midwife had warned my mother of some complications and advised her to go to hospital for delivery. As my grandmother and other neighborhood women rehearsed in the courtyard for their journey to the hospital, my mother watched from a window. One of the women sat in front of an imaginary taxi, waved her hand at the imaginary soldiers, and shouted, “sir, please, delivery case.” Everyone liked the plan except for my mother. She did not like the idea of unknown soldiers looking at her belly on the street while she cried and perspired in labor.

In the end, I was born in my childhood home, without any medical assistance, in the same room where my elder siblings were born. “I have no good memories of your birth,” my mother tells me. “It only reminds me of the horrors.”

As I grew up, I began making sense of the conflict around me, but it took me a while to realize how the presence of soldiers caused distress and anxiety for women in our conservative society, forced them to suffer and grieve in silence.

My great aunt lived close to our house and my sister and me were addicted to the company of her two daughters, my mother’s cousins, who spun pashmina and watched us dance as the radio played old Bollywood numbers. The younger sister was secretly in a love affair with a distant relative who was also an active militant. One day when a crackdown was announced and men were asked to assemble for identification, the militant came running to my great aunt’s house and asked for refuge. When soldiers came to search the house, he managed to hide in a room where my mother’s cousins sat spinning wool, attempting to divert the soldiers’ attention.

They found him and emptied around a dozen bullets into his chest. The girls watched, stone-faced, as his blood made patterns on the mud floor. He died within seconds.

Afterward, my mother’s cousin skillfully gave fake smiles and acted normal during the day. But at night, as I slept between her and her sister, I could hear her sobbing in the dark. Her sister often told me not to pay attention and concentrate on my sleep. In other words she would tell me to let her do what she couldn’t do during day.

Things have begun to change, though slowly. Last year in May, a group of fifty Kashmiri women—including doctors, students, social activists, and house wives—came together and signed a petition demanding a fresh probe into the mass rape that took place in the village of Kunan-Poshpora on the night of February 23, 1990. Soldiers in the Indian army raped forty Kashmiri women during a search operation that night. The government hushed up the case and gave clean chits to the army men despite having solid evidence against them.

Twenty-three years of injustice had left the victims hopeless. But when the petitioners visited them, listened to their stories, and encouraged them to not to give up fighting, they started their struggle afresh. For the first time since the attacks, the victims traveled to Srinagar and made media appearances.

That moment offers fresh hope, but it almost didn't occur. Ifra Butt, a social activist with The Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS) and one of the founding members of the support group that started the petition, told me how hard it was to convince the victims to take up the fight. Faced with their reluctance to speak about their experiences in public, Butt told the women that there was no shame in facing the world and telling people what happened that night. And if there was any, it was our collective shame and not theirs alone.

Shazia Yousuf lives in Kashmir. She holds a Master's in Mass Communication and Journalism from the University of Kashmir and a Master's in Print and Multimedia Journalism from Emerson College. She was recently awarded the Panos South Asia fellowship and will be writing about Kashmiri women and their perspective of war.

Aditi Sriram

Aditi Sriram's writing has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Guardian*, *Narratively*, and, best of all, *Guernica*. Visit her website to read more of her work.

At *Guernica*, we've spent the last 20 years producing uncompromising journalism.